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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN TRIBAL GOVERNANCE 101, PART 1: LOYALTY,
ACCESS, AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: This cable is the first of a three part series on internal governance in Jordan's tribal system. Jordan's social contract is based on tribes pledging loyalty to the King in exchange for access to the resources of the state. The tribes exercise influence through both national politicians and local bureaucrats who owe their positions to the tribe. Competition for such positions, however, can be fierce. The dominance of the tribes over Jordan's political system has largely excluded Palestinian-origin Jordanians from political influence. As a response, Palestinians are now forming their own "tribes" in a bid to access the power of the state. End Summary.

Jordan's Tribal System

[2](#). (SBU) East Bank tribes are the basic unit of Jordanian politics. (Note: While "tribe" in the larger Arab world typically signifies a large familial grouping, Jordanians use "tribe" interchangeably for both larger and smaller social groups that include smaller clans and family networks. End Note.) The Jordanian state is built on top of tribal governance structures, which supplement its authority but also influence its course. This series of cables will examine the internal governance structures of the tribes, with a view towards shedding light on how tribal governance affects governance of the country as a whole. This cable will briefly outline the social contract which cements the position of the tribes. Part two will delve into the role of tribal leaders. Part three will examine the system of tribal law.

The Social Contract

[3](#). (SBU) The tribes are the lynchpin of Jordan's social contract, in which they pledge fealty to the King in return for access to the largesse of the state. As a consequence of this formula, tribal East Bankers dominate the public sphere in Jordan. They represent the vast majority of military personnel, bureaucrats, and members of parliament. These positions allow tribal interests to control the state budget and even more importantly allows them to dispense patronage jobs in the government through "wasta" -- the system of "connections" and influence-peddling along tribal lines.

[4](#). (SBU) The tribes are the primary vehicle for the exercise of power in Jordan. At the national level, tribes flex their political muscles through the MPs, ministers, and high government officials who obtained their positions through tribal support. At the local level, tribal leaders work with government officials and serve as liaisons between ordinary citizens and bureaucrats. The measure of a tribe's strength

is its ability to wield influence nationally and locally to the benefit of its members.

15. (SBU) The clearest example of how tribes dominate the public sector is the 2001 electoral law. Through manipulation of district boundaries, overrepresentation of rural areas, and quotas for bedouins, Jordan's electoral system heavily favors tribal interests. A further boost for tribal candidates comes in the form of the so-called "one man, one vote" system, in which voters cast a single ballot for individual candidates in multiple-member districts. This allows the leaders of large tribes, who traditionally dictate voting preferences, to purposefully split their votes among their kinsmen in a way that obtains parliamentary seats disproportionate to their actual numbers. As there are no strong political parties that run national issue-based campaigns, Jordanians tend to vote for the candidate who will best represent the tribe in the struggle for access to government jobs and services. At the local level, East Bank tribal candidates whose access to the state is unquestioned can fulfill this role, while Palestinian-origin candidates find it difficult to persuade voters of their ability to deliver that same access.

16. (SBU) Within the bounds of Jordan's social contract, the tribes constantly struggle for influence, prestige, and resources. The measure of tribal strength in Jordan comes from an ability to obtain patronage appointments, development projects, and financial resources from the government. Tribal figures keep detailed mental lists of how many ministers, MPs, and military figures various tribes have produced. Heads of government acknowledge the importance of

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the tribes in the formation of every cabinet, seeking to ensure that all major tribes are represented, at times regardless of qualifications.

17. (SBU) Jordan's larger tribes can usually count on at least one of their members holding a ministerial or high government position. The Majali tribe, natives of Karak, are currently represented by parliament speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali and Minister of Transport Sahl Al-Majali. The Beni Sakher tribe, natives of the Salt area, were recently represented by Interior Minister Eid Al-Fayez, but now count Health Minister Nayef Al-Fayez as their minister of choice. Hailing from the Zarqa area, the Beni Hassan tribe has many high ranking military personnel to its credit, along with Legal Affairs Minister Salem Khazaleh. From the north, the Beni Khaled tribe is another perennial presence in government, with Interior Minister Nayef Al-Qadi as its current representative.

18. (SBU) Over the years, tribes have adjusted their strategy for obtaining and maintaining political power vis-a-vis fellow East Bankers, according to Mohammed Al-Masri, who is preparing a large study of Jordanian tribes for the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. He points to the use of female candidates in the 2007 parliamentary elections as a prime example of tribes adjusting their political strategy to ensure expanded representation in parliament, and therefore access to government resources. In 2003, only 42 candidates ran for the six quota seats allocated for women in Jordan's parliament. As a result, smaller tribes were able to shrewdly take advantage of the political calculus. By 2007, tribal leaders had caught on and adjusted their electoral strategy accordingly with 212 candidates running for those six slots (Ref A). As a result, all of the female MPs in the current parliament owe their positions to tribal loyalties.

Palestinian "Tribes"

19. (SBU) Jordan's social contract has led to a de facto division of labor within Jordan between East Bankers and

Palestinians. The stereotype (which largely holds up) is that while East Bank tribes control the government and military, Palestinians control the commercial sphere. In recent years, that dichotomy has come under strain. As public sector wages decline, East Bank tribes long for the higher wages and broader opportunities of the private sector.

For their part, Palestinians are starting to demand greater access to the political system in proportion with their influence in Jordan's economy.

¶10. (SBU) One of the main obstacles to the Palestinians' pursuit of a greater role in government is the lack of a tribal mechanism for communicating with the state (Refs A and B). Palestinians have tribes of their own, but those tribes were not woven into the Jordan political dynamic of the state, either during the period of union between the two banks or after. Following the events of "Black September" in 1970, in which Palestinian militants nearly succeeded in overthrowing the Jordanian monarchy, Palestinians and their tribal affiliations were further shunned from the system of Jordanian politics, leaving them without a mechanism to compete with East Bankers for influence, prestige, and resources from the government.

¶11. (SBU) There are indications that Palestinians in Jordan are employing a strategy to tap into the potential of tribal influence. Masri discovered an interesting phenomenon while putting together a study on the mechanics of Jordan's tribes:

Palestinians are now "inventing" tribal affiliations in an attempt to tap into the organizing logic of the Jordanian state. He gave the example of Palestinians from the Jerusalem suburb of Abu Dis, who have banded together to adopt the surname "Abu Disi" as a means of creating a tribal affiliation. While the pure political gamesmanship of the move seems almost ludicrous (the former residents of Abu Dis have no familial relationship and are creating a "tribe" based on flimsy logic at best), Masri believes that it is crazy enough to work, as it represents a kind of adaptation to the norms of Jordanian political life -- an intrinsic show of loyalty to the regime that pro-establishment East Bankers claim stands in the way of integrating Palestinians into the fabric of Jordanian society. "Modern forms of organization such as political parties and unions aren't working for Palestinians in Jordan," Masri says. "Adopting the tribal system shows that they are willing to be integrated if given the chance."

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) For better or for worse, Jordan's tribes form the core of the country's stability and power structure. While many Jordanians recognize that tribal structures promote inefficiency and inequality in government, they also realize that those structures are at least partly responsible for the political stability Jordan enjoys. Jettisoning that system would mean a painful realignment of the country's political and social calculus -- something that many Jordanians see as too risky. Rather than attempting to replace the tribal system, those on the outside (read: Palestinians) are seeking to join it, an implicit recognition that Jordan's social contract, however imperfect, is currently the only available option.

Beecroft